



# Young people are shaping climate change and health action

Insights from a study of six low- and middle-income countries: Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Vietnam

Stockholm Environment Institute  
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## From the vulnerable...

"You are playing tricks on our future, you can't play tricks anymore", Sohanur Rahman, a young Bangladeshi climate activist, reflected on the role of children and youth in climate action. The empty promises made by world leaders, governments and business leaders at international climate conferences deeply frustrate Rahman. He believes that it is the job of his generation to hold adults accountable for action on climate change. That is the only way to protect their health and future in this crisis.

Indeed, the health and well-being of future generations are bound to the fate of the planet. A warmer world is having wide-ranging impacts, which are disproportionately felt in the 'Global South'. Already, people of ages 10-24 are having to cope with devastating consequences, and young women, girls, people with disability, the urban poor and other marginalised groups are shouldering unequal burdens.

Children and youth in his own community, Rahman observes, are the most vulnerable, as heat waves, saltwater intrusion, and water shortage threaten their physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health. For them, tackling the health impacts of climate change is a matter of life and death.

## ... to leaders

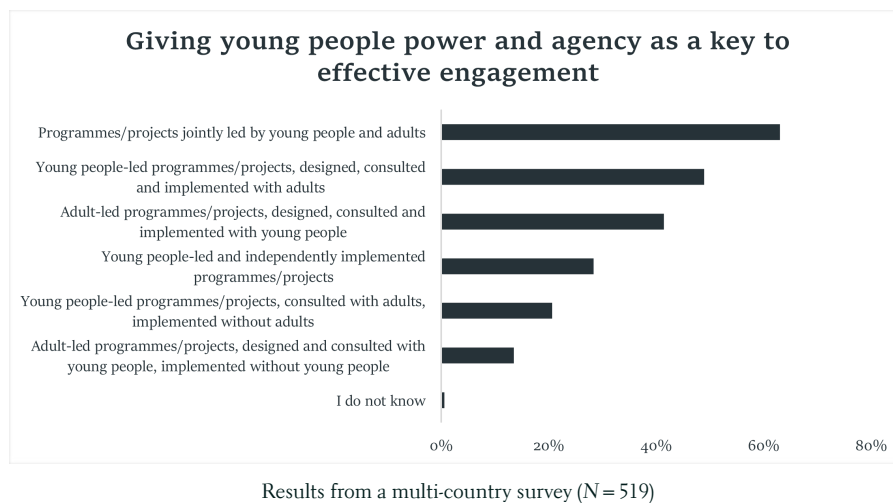
Seeing how the climate crisis is putting his own generation in danger, Rahman felt compelled to take action. He joined aspiring leaders of YouthNet for Climate Justice to increase Bangladeshi youth's awareness on climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience building. They engage in and provide training on policy and decision-making processes.

"We may have a little less knowledge on the scientific side, a little less technical knowledge. But we have a lot of experience in life. They [adult leaders] will not be able to raise the questions that we can raise. In many cases, they do not even ask questions. They have conflict of interests. But our interest is our life, our survival, our health, our livelihood." - Rahman

Over the past few years, Rahman and his peers have made a real impact. In 2019, they led advocacy efforts alongside local politicians and contributed to the passing of the Planetary Emergency Bill. In 2020, refusing to give in to the COVID-19 pandemic, they turned to online and digital platforms to continue their work, calling on the Bangladeshi government to reduce coal investments. Now, in 2021, the group continues dialogues with embassies and diplomatic bodies to advocate for stronger climate action.

Around the world, young people like Rahman are not passive victims but agents of change. They have demonstrated the capacities and agency to respond to the climate crisis. While Greta Thunberg and the 'Fridays for Future' school strike movement have gained international recognition, the voices of youth activists from low- and middle-income countries, like Kyaw Ye The from Myanmar, Mariel Ubaldo from the Philippines, Vanessa Nakate from Uganda, Makena Muigai from Kenya and many more should also be heard and given support.

According an online survey conducted earlier this year, professionals of different ages in climate change and health sectors believe that young people contribute unique perspectives, insights and skills to the fight against climate change. Rahman's group, and many others across Africa and Asia, show that young people are using their social networks to raise awareness and mobilize action. In fact, survey respondents indicate that young people should not only be a part of climate and health activities, but they should take a lead role in all phases of design and implementation.



## "This movement must survive"

But the road to change is never easy. Structural barriers and biases too often fail to recognise young people's rights and agency. Despite their desire to work with the government to act on climate change, Rahman remains frustrated that youth voices may be heard but are rarely taken seriously by those in power. Policy makers often underestimate young people's abilities and contributions, and therefore exclude them from decision-making.

Perceptions and biases against young people also mean that support and resources are not readily available. The lack of funding allocated for young people threatens the sustainability of the youth group that Rahman is a part of: "This movement [...] must survive. Survival requires a long-term means of financial support [...] and will not work if only foreign funds are relied upon."

"Young people are underestimated everywhere in policy making and in government budget. We are not being valued. Adults think that young people have no knowledge or experience of climate change." - Rahman

Rahman's initiatives and the struggles he faces show that more must be done to address the impacts of climate change on health and give power to young people as part of this fight. In order to understand how we can best support and amplify their voices, we talked to over 600 children, youth leaders, decision makers, and civil society actors in six low- and middle-income countries to gather insights on meaningful youth engagement.

## Youth engagement in Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Vietnam

Our research found that young people's engagement is active, diverse and multi-faceted. Whether it is through government consultation, development projects, volunteering programmes, social movements, or activism, youth-driven civic engagement proves an important force in tackling environmental and health challenges. In both rural and urban areas, young people are raising public awareness, participating in policy processes, and taking concrete actions to adapt to climate change and improve public health.

The role of young people in addressing health impacts of climate change, however, remains a gap. Currently, some programmes and initiatives involve young people in parallel health and climate change projects, while others draw the links between health, well-being and environmental sustainability. Climate change and environmental engagement may also have health co-benefits, such as efforts related to climate-induced disasters, air pollution, agriculture, or energy-saving stoves with positive impacts on well-being, respiratory health, and food security. There is room for more efforts to engage young people with an explicit focus on climate change impacts on health.

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### **Youth-led advocacy in Vietnam**

Mat Xanh, or Green Eyes, is a youth group under the Youth for Environment project of the For Vietnamese Stature Foundation, dedicated to environmental advocacy and raising awareness ...

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### **Youth network and policy engagement in Kenya**

The African Youth Initiative on Climate (AYICC) is a network of young people founded in Nairobi, Kenya in 2006, just before COP12. With over 10,000 members in 42 countries, AYIC...

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## **Challenges facing youth engagement**

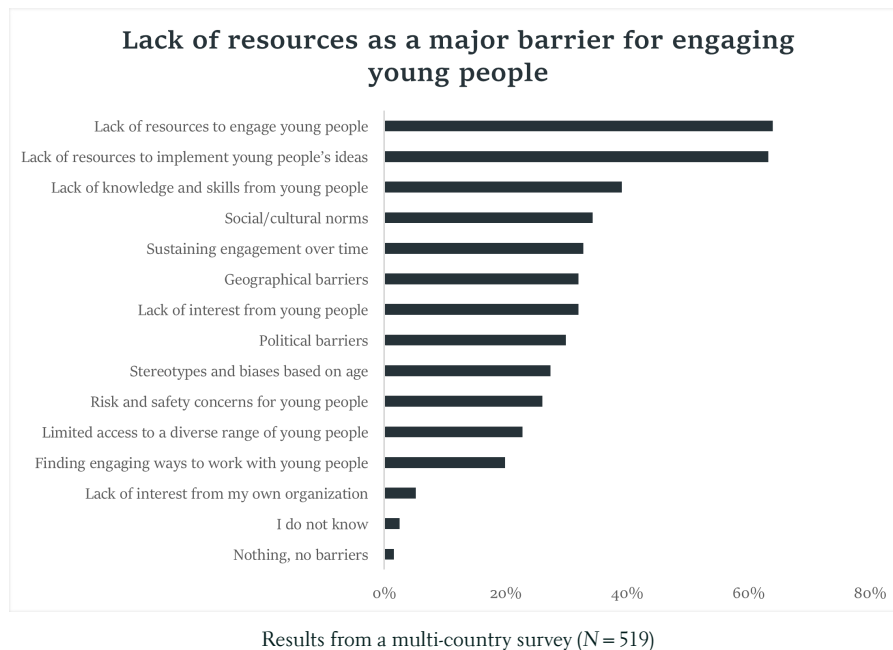
Despite proven potential, young people may not have equal access to opportunities and the space to practice their power and agency. We found that the effectiveness of young people's engagement is shaped by language, gender, economic background, age, ability, and geography, among other factors.

For example, engagement with young people often takes place in official languages, leaving out those in remote, rural communities and ethnic minorities who may use a different language or dialect. Furthermore, climate change information is more available in English rather than local languages. Hence, opportunities are more accessible to young people with English capacity, which depends on access to education and is different among socio-economic groups.

In addition to the language barrier, young people in rural, remote and mountainous communities often do not enjoy the same access to opportunities, information and education as their urban counterparts. The geographical divide is exacerbated by gender roles and the belief, which still exists in many places, that women should get married early and take care of the family rather than engaging in political spaces.

So, socioeconomic status is a factor, living in a remote area is a factor, being woman is a factor, disability is a factor, indigenous is a factor.” - Rahman

In addition to socio-economic factors that differentiate groups of young people, their engagement is also challenged by structural, organisational and financial barriers. It is harder for young people to engage when policies and strategies are not accessible to them, and institutional mechanisms are not inclusive. This is the result of many policy- and decision-makers viewing young people as passive victims. In certain cases, even when there are institutionalised channels to participate, engagement can be bureaucratic or tokenistic.



Another challenge is the lack of capacity and resources within institutions and organisations to engage young people. This may stem from a lack of interest in working with children and youth, which is often a long-term commitment without immediately visible outcomes and impacts. Closely linked to this is access to funding, partly due to the lack of effective financial mechanisms in the climate change sector. Without recognition and formal channels to participate, young people themselves have neither allocated budget nor legal status to fundraise.

Most importantly, in many places, adults see young people as victims rather than capable actors. Interests and initiatives from young people have not been met with an equal willingness to listen and engage from public and private organisations alike. Many adults believe that their place is at school and in the classroom. This attitude does not only impact the opportunities for young people to engage but also their own motivation and aspiration.

## The road ahead

Young people are undoubtedly shaping climate change and health action across Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Senegal and Vietnam. However, as Rahman's story shows, effective engagement of young people in grappling with the health impacts of climate change requires greater recognition and concerted efforts from

public and private sector actors alike, from local up to national levels.

In particular, the links between climate change, health, youth engagement, and related development challenges must to be articulated and reflected in policies and decision-making processes. Stronger connection and collaboration between the climate change and public health sectors is needed to create new spaces for learning and knowledge creation with young people as a key stakeholder and actor.

### Best practices for youth engagement in climate change and health



Coupled training & action for capacity building



Long-term commitment & sustainable financing



Built-in incentives & co-benefits to ensure inclusion



Safe, child-friendly and climate-conscious environment



Local scale to reflect lived experience and encourage ownership



Exploring new communication tools and engagement models

Decision-makers at all levels should identify, establish and support formal avenues for young people to be part of decision-making and implementation processes, while also making administrative processes and policy communication inclusive for people of all ages, abilities and background.

Civil society actors, including practitioners, NGOs, and researchers, play important roles in bridging the government and the general public, including young people. Civil society must sustain and expand efforts to work with young people in holding public and private institutions accountable and demand for transformative climate action, through training, co-designing and implementing programmes with youth-led organisations and building capacity and advocating for governments to work with young people.

International donors and national funding agencies are key actors for ensuring young people are meaningfully engaged in climate and health action, by supporting and scaling up existing youth-led initiatives, prioritising funding for marginalised groups and engaging new, alternative ways to engage young people.

This is a product of research conducted by the Stockholm Environment Institute and Save the Children International, with financial support from Wellcome. [Click here](#) to read the full report.